

## ONE

**HOW NOT TO DO THINGS WITH WORDS**

Sara Ahmed  
Goldsmiths, University of London

Correspondence: Sara Ahmed, Goldsmiths, University of London  
[S.Ahmed@gold.ac.uk](mailto:S.Ahmed@gold.ac.uk)

To cite this article: [Sara Ahmed, "How Not to Do Things with Words"  
*Wagadu: A Journal of Transnational Women's and Gender Studies*, 2016,  
vol. 16, pp. 1-10]

I first used the word “non-performativity” at a workshop on racism in higher education that took place at Leeds University in 2002. It popped right out of my mouth when I was asking a question. I am sure it came out like that because it gave expression to a sentiment that was being shared by many of us in the room. We were discussing how easy it was for universities to commit to anti-racism without doing anything that provided evidence of that commitment. Even saying this is saying something: it implies a commitment can be given *in order to* provide evidence of something. I will return to why and how evidence matters in due course. And the word that came to mind for an action that was not followed through was “non-performative.” A commitment is often understood as a performative: it is not describing or denoting something; a commitment “commits.” But what seemed to be the case was that commitments were makeable *because* they were not doable: it seems you can make a commitment because commitments do not commit institutions to a course of action. Commitments might even become a way of not doing something by appearing to do something. Understanding the role or function of institutional commitments was to understand how institutions do not do things with words, or how institutions use words as a way of not doing things. I often wonder if there is an instruction manual somewhere with this as an unofficial title: *Diversity, or how not to do things with words*.

The idea that “not doing something” could be an unofficial instruction manual is suggestive. Not doing something is still an action; it might even be a technique that is perfected over time. The action being performed is just not the action made explicit by the utterance. So a commitment is still doing something even when it is not committing something.

How can not doing something be an action? Many actions might be necessary in order for something not to be done or for an attempt to transform something not to lead to a transformation of something. And the reproduction of an existing order might depend on the failure to modify that order. Reading through the papers for this special issue is like being given an object lesson in how much the reproduction of a world depends upon the containment of our efforts to transform worlds. We learn how easily diversity can be adopted by an institution as a word, or even as a motto of a city, as Shana Almeida explores in her analysis of Toronto, or as a style of leadership or management, as Mechthild Nagel discusses, with the implied intonation of diversity as civility, as getting on or getting along. We can, as Eike Marten does, tell the story of words like diversity as a story of usage as well as travel, how some words might be used more the more they imply something has been overcome. Policies can be adopted, words can be uttered; decisions can be made, without anything really changing. Sometimes we refer to this as the “lip service” model of diversity. To use a word like “non-performativity” is to reveal something about institutional mechanics: how things are reproduced by the very appearance of being transformed.

So, for me, using the term *non-performativity* was itself a performative utterance: I was doing something, or trying to do something, and not just say something, about how institutions can reproduce themselves at the very moments they appear not to be reproducing themselves: how diversity can be about how whiteness reappears, for instance. So it is important for me to state that I first used this word non-performativity *before* doing the empirical project on diversity work in higher education, which I draw on in my book *On Being Included: Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life* (2012). And by talking to diversity practitioners, I began to think more

explicitly about the consequences of non-performativity for our own work as diversity workers; whether we are employed as practitioners or academics or are both. If institutions do words not to do things, then we have work to do, which often means work to do on these words – work to do with these words. I think my arguments in *On Being Included* were really about this: the consequences of non-performativity.

We need to recognise that even the words we use can be ways of not doing things – we are complicit and compromised because of where we work. We are not outside the institutions we are trying to transform even when we are perceived as outsiders. And so: we fight for words that keep alive certain histories, histories of struggle that were necessary for some of us to get here, to be here, knowing they will go into more general circulation and that they will lose something along the way. Following Vanessa Eileen Thompson and Veronika Zablotsky we might consider how the rhetoric of diversity can work as a distraction, how we need to reanimate words such as diversity and difference by linking them with social justice. We then are trying to modify the context in which the utterance is made. We are trying to contest the ease of a co-option. So much effort is required because of that ease, as well as to make sense of that ease. Diversity work in a more substantive sense, transforming the norms that govern institutional life, is about trying to make things more difficult than they appear to be. When words do not do something, we have to work *on* these words in order to try to *make them do something*. We have work to do because of what they do not do. I learnt from my interviews that even non-performative speech acts can be useful: if organisations are saying what they are doing, we can show they are not doing what they are saying. Diversity work often takes place in the gap between words and deeds.

We also learn that even our own words can be used to minimise the disruption cause by our efforts. But as Jane Chin Davidson reminds, we should not be silenced by what happens to our own words; speaking can be another kind of dissent, especially when you speak with a voice or an accent that makes you sound out of tune or out of place. Words like

intersectionality too, words that have functioned as black feminist tools, which are sharpened when used with precision, can become non-performatives: they can circulate because they have been emptied of force; the more they move around, often by being cut off from a labouring body, the less work they do. Indeed, intersectionality can be said in order not to be done, as if saying it is doing it, almost as if the word takes the place of something, as promising more than it can deliver as Nikita Dhawan and Maria do Mar Castro suggest. Indeed, a number of papers in this special issue refer to Sirma Bilge's (2013) important critique of the "whitening" of intersectionality within European Gender studies and beyond. Bilge's exemplary work shows us how high the political stakes are; she exposes the political costs of what I called non-performativity.

To make these critiques is not to stop using the words. Words are tools. We have to use the tools that are handy. But we have a struggle on our hands because of what the words do not do. And by words we mean worlds. And by worlds we mean walls. We come up against walls because we are trying to transform institutions. Walls came up a lot in the data I collected for my research project, which involved interviewing practitioners about their work. One practitioner describes her work thus: "it's a banging your head against the brick wall job." A job description can become a wall description. My arguments about non-performativity were not just calls for action but a recognition of the collective labour that is necessary because of how institutional walls *keep standing*.

Let me explain a little more by returning to one of the examples first shared in chapter 4 of *On Being Included: Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life* (2012) on commitment. It is an example of what I have since called "wall encounters."

When I was first here there was a policy that you had to have three people on every panel who had been diversity trained. But then there was a decision early on when I was here, that it should be everybody, all panel members, at least internal people. They took that decision at the

equality and diversity committee which several members of SMT were present at. But then the director of Human Resources found out about it and decided we didn't have the resources to support it, and it went to Council with that taken out and Council were told that they were happy to have just three members, only a person on Council who was an external member of the diversity committee went ballistic – and I am not kidding went ballistic – and said the minutes didn't reflect what had happened in the meeting because the minutes said the decision was different to what actually happened (and I didn't take the minutes by the way). And so they had to take it through and reverse it. And the Council decision was that all people should be trained. And despite that I have then sat in meetings where they have just continued saying that it has to be just 3 people on the panel. And I said but no Council changed their view and I can give you the minutes and they just look at me as if I am saying something really stupid, this went on for ages, even though the Council minutes definitely said all panel members should be trained. And to be honest sometimes you just give up (2012, pp. 124-125).

So what is going on here? A lot is going on here: *what goes on involves many goings on*. We learn that even when nothing happens, nothing changes, a lot work is going on; a lot of effort, the effort to change something, the effort not to be changed by something. In the first instance, it seems as if there is an institutional decision. That is not really the first instance: there is a history of how this decision was made, how it began as a proposal. But once made, that is not the end of the story. The non-performative: it is not the end of the story. Individuals within the institution must act as if the decision has been made for it to be made. If they do not, it has not. A decision made in the present about the future, a decision that is willed, that operates under the promissory sign “we will,” is overridden by the momentum of the past. In this case, the head of personnel did not need to take the decision out of the minutes for the decision not to bring something into effect. This is what I intended to reveal by calling this dynamic “non-

performativity”: how naming something does not bring something into effect, or how something is named *in order not to bring something into effect*. An institution can say “yes” when there is not enough behind that “yes” for something to be brought about. An institutional wall is when a will, “a yes,” does not bring something about, “a yes” that conceals this “not bringing” under the appearance of “having brought.”

It is only the practical effort to bring about transformation that *allows the wall to be apparent*. To those who do not come against it, the wall does not appear: the institution is experienced as “yes” as open, committed and diverse, as happy as its mission statement, as willing as its equality statement.

We are learning how institutional statements and policies are a way of not doing something. Sometimes a policy can be used as evidence: a way of saying, or of showing, that something has been done. As another practitioner I interviewed put it: “Well I think in terms of the policies, people’s views are ‘well we’ve got them now so that’s done, it’s finished.’...*I’m not sure if that’s even worse than having nothing*, that idea in people’s heads that we’ve done race, when we very clearly haven’t done race.” Policies can function as claims to performativity: as if having a policy means the work has been finished. A policy: how not to “do race” by appearing to have “done race.”

The wall: that which keeps standing. By talking to diversity workers I began to appreciate how the institution is a plumbing system: you have to *work out* where the blockage is, what prevents something from moving through the system. This is why I call diversity workers “institutional plumbers.” In the example from my research what stopped something from happening *could have been* the removal of the policy from the minutes; it *could have been* the failure to notice this removal; but it wasn’t. It was the way in which those within the institution acted as if this policy had not been approved. A lot can be happening to stop something from happening. Let me summarise the finding: what stops movement moves.

Diversity work is hard in the sense of difficult: it requires more effort to come up against what keeps standing. The brick wall is hard in other senses too. In physics hardness refers to *the resistance of materials to change under force*. A wall, and I am thinking of an actual wall here, is made out of hard material. Say you throw something against the wall: a little object. You can witness the hardness of the wall by what happens to what is thrown: a wall might be scratched at the surface by encountering such an object. The object might splinter and break by the force of what it comes up against.

This is what diversity work sometimes feels like: scratching at the surface, scratching the surface. Hardness here is a quality of things that is revealed as an encounter between things. Diversity work is certainly an encounter between things: our bodies can be the little objects hurled against walls, those sedimented histories. Watch what happens. Ouch. And maybe it happens, time and time again. Hardness has a history or even is a history. When I say I come up against a wall I am describing what I encounter when I try to change something that has becoming harder or hardened over time. Literally I mean: when we talk about walls we are talking about the *material resistance* to being changed by force. *The materiality of resistance to transformation*: diversity workers know this materiality very well. We live this materiality.

When we use the expression “it is a banging our head against a brick wall job” it is important to recognise that the brick wall being referred to is a metaphorical wall. It is not that there “really” is a wall; it is not a physical or actual wall. That the wall is not an actual wall makes the wall even harder. The wall is a wall that might as well be there, because the effects of what is there are *just like* the effects of a wall. And yet not: if an actual wall was there, we would all be able to see the wall, or to touch it. The wall would be evidence. Yes I am back to the question of evidence: this time the wall as evidence of what a commitment does not do; the wall is evidence of the non-performative. But of course then: the wall is what does not materialize. To come up against institutional walls is to come

up against what others do not see; and (this is even harder) you come up against what others are often invested in not seeing. So: the example of the diversity policy that does not do anything is a tantalisingly tangible example of what goes on so much and so often. We have many such tangible stories in this special issue. But that it is tangible, that I can share the story with you, is a consequence of diversity work and of the labour of a diversity worker, of her blood, sweat and tears. I used to think that as a researcher I was generating data on diversity work, but I have come to realise diversity work generates data.

We are telling stories about how what appears can conceal a disappearance. A policy disappears despite there being a paper trail, despite the evidence, or even because of the evidence. The paper provides evidence of a commitment. You can wave it in front of them, and it still does not appear! And there is more to say about what or who does not appear. People disappear too, because of what they make evident, of what they try to bring into view. What happened to that policy can happen to those who try to transform institutions: even if you are not asked to leave, they can make it difficult for you to keep going, to keep doing the work you are doing. The story of how the wall that keeps standing is thus the same story as the story of the exhaustion of a diversity worker, of what happens to her. In a conversation I had with diversity practitioners in 2013 a wall becomes a water canon: “It’s like water cannons. Sometimes the success story is to stay standing in the face of everything they throw at you. It doesn’t always feel like a success. But it is a success.” The effort becomes: to stay standing.

And to stay standing in the face of what is thrown at you is an achievement. This achievement is not tangible to others. So we could say: a wall is how a wall is not revealed. Intangibility, what does not become evidence, is itself achieved. A wall that is something tangible to some is not even there for others because of who they are or because of what they are not trying to do. Those who don’t come up against walls might then (do then) experience those who speak about walls as *wall makers*, as if to speak of walls is to bring something into existence that would otherwise not be there. The



feminist killjoy is a wall maker. Just recall the words of the diversity practitioner: “they just look at me as if I am saying something really stupid.” We can imagine the eyes rolling when she points out the policy. The diversity worker could thus be described as an institutional killjoy. I became interested in this figure of the killjoy, I began to pick her up and put her to work, after listening to another diversity practitioner. She said: “you know you go through that in these sorts of jobs where you go to say something and you can just see people going ‘oh here she goes.’” We both laughed, recognizing that each other recognized that scene. It is interesting to me, on reflection, that it can be others who put into words something you have yourself have experienced. A killjoy: so often she borrows her words from others. So yes, we both recognized that each other recognized that scene.

The diversity worker in becoming an institutional killjoy is not heard; when she speaks of walls, walls come up. A wall comes up in this reframing of walls as *immaterial*, as phantoms, as how we *stop ourselves* how we stop ourselves from doing something, from being something. This means that: what is real, what is in concrete terms the *hardest*, is not always available as an object that can be perceived (from some viewing points), or an object that can be touched (even by those who are seated at the same table). *What is the hardest for some does not even exist for others.*

Special issues such as this one allow us to share our experiences of coming up against walls. These are not just depressing experiences; though depression and exhaustion are part of the story. We know so much about institutions from our own efforts to transform them. We become more creative and inventive because of how many paths are blocked. We have to find other ways of getting through. Indeed, diversity work might also require a support system: so that a diversity worker is not so exhausted by the work that she ends up giving up. We have to find ways of sharing the costs of doing this work. This is why it is so important not only to keep reflecting on our work but to keep sharing these reflections.

## References

- Ahmed, Sara. (2012). *On being included: Racism and diversity in institutional life*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Bilge, Sirma. (2013). Intersectionality undone: Saving intersectionality from feminist intersectionality studies. *Du Bois Review: Social Science Research on Race*, 10(2), 405-424.